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THE BEARING OF  
RELIGIOUS EQUALITY  
ON THE  
RIGHTS OF INDIVIDUALS  
AND  
SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES.

**A Lecture**

BY

EDWARD MIALL, M.P.

DELIVERED IN THE MEMORIAL HALL, MANCHESTER,  
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## THE BEARING OF RELIGIOUS EQUALITY ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIVIDUALS AND SPIRITUAL COMMUNITIES.

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WHEN I gave my consent to open the present series of lectures with one on the subject of "Religious Equality," I did so with a simultaneous upcast to my mind of certain apostolic words: "To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, and for you it is safe." I was not guided to my decision by a notion that I had anything fresh to say upon the question, or that you had anything new to learn. The topic is in its own nature so simple, so self-illuminating, so directly answering to the instinctive yearnings of the human conscience and heart, as to furnish very little scope for remark. In this respect, it is like a prismatic crystal—capable of showing a correct analysis of the light which falls upon it, but yet singularly colourless and translucent in itself. I don't need to detain you by any attempt to extract from the phrase its logical meaning, or to dilate upon what, in substance, is now almost everywhere and by everybody well understood. "Religious equality," as a mere phrase, may not express all that, in idea and in sentiment, we mean by it—but, albeit priests may pass on the other side of the way without recognising it, there is some ground for hoping, if not confidently believing, that "they" of the commoner sort "who run, may read" it, and the "wayfarers" of our electoral bodies, "though fools, will not err therein."

The fact is, that religious equality, as a sentiment, is to some extent, and, as a principle of action, is wholly, a thing of modern growth. Resembling in these respects the Apostle Paul, it is like one "born out of due time," but is nevertheless "not a whit behind."

the chiefest" of political principles. It is one of those developments of Christian life which has been germinally imbedded in it from the beginning, but which waited for a prepared condition of society to make itself manifest. Personal liberty, social and international peace, and religious equality, are the three graces which, born of a parentage that most of us acknowledge to be Divine, have remained late on in the world's history before finding an adequate opportunity for asserting themselves. The light of revelation, as it pierced the mists of human error, disclosed, one by one, moral principles of a somewhat more refined and reserved nature than the moral and spiritual state of men could make full and profitable use of in earlier times. Christianity condemns civil establishments of religion, after the same fashion, and by similar processes, as those by which she condemns slavery and war—by quickening and nourishing aspirations and habits which feel them to be alien and antagonistic, and which must cast them out, or be ultimately cast out by them. The Christian people of mediæval times, the Reformers of three centuries ago, the Puritans under the disastrous reign of the Stuarts, were as ignorant of the claims, and, consequently, as blind to the charms, of religious equality, as they were callous to the sin of slavery—but it does not necessarily follow that modern insensibility to either of these principles is, or can be, as lightly tinged by blameworthiness as was theirs. Liberationists—to use a convenient term for a most inconvenient periphrasis, and which has the further recommendation of being all but universally understood—are often twitted with having got far in advance of what was professed by their forefathers. Owen and Howe, Matthew Henry and Doddridge, Isaac Watts and John Wesley, are occasionally cited by friends of the Church Establishment to bear witness that they knew nothing of religious equality in their day; while Presbyterians of the type of Baxter and Calamy, against whose spiritual reputation not a whisper can now be breathed, regarded it, if they ever thought of it at all, as a doctrine of the devil. But what does this prove? That the principle must be a false one? Not at all—but that events had not yet put into their hands that key to the inner teaching of the gospel of the grace of God which they have subsequently put into ours. Do the opponents of religious equality object to this representation of the case?



Do they regard us as bound in reason to stand by the premature judgments of the Nonconformists who have gone before us? Well, but how is it they do not call to mind the canon of their Master: "With what measure ye mete, it shall be meted to you again?" Why, the predecessors of our modern Establishmentarians are left quite as far behind by their successors as the old Puritans and Nonconformists are by Liberationists. *They* reviled, ejected, imprisoned, pilloried, and branded the very men whom their ecclesiastical descendants held up before us as bright exemplars of spiritual wisdom and virtue. We do not accept as oracular every thought expressed by our Nonconformist forefathers, especially on questions which had scarcely been propounded in their day. The subject of religious equality, like that of personal slavery, and that of war, has had more abundant light cast upon it since the generations which the glow of their spirituality adorned. But when we are taunted with our degeneracy, on account of the more decided views we hold than theirs on the question of Church Establishment, might not they who taunt us do well to remember that they also have advanced beyond the position stiffly maintained by Establishmentarians of between two and three centuries back—and that to such of them as now plead the authority of Owen, Baxter, Watts, and Wesley in condemnation of the doctrine of religious equality, and in disparagement of the spiritual character of those who profess it, there is danger lest they incur the woful heritage of them who were charged with building the tombs of the prophets, and garnishing the sepulchres of the righteous, and thereby witnessing unto themselves that they are the children of them which killed the prophets.

Religious equality is a claim and a right correlative with religious obligation. It grows out of the relation in which Christianity puts the spirit of man to the Father of Spirits. The clerical gentleman, with an university stamp upon his name, who goes about lecturing to the public, asking what is religious equality, and, proving to his own satisfaction that there can be no such thing in this world, does not appear to have reflected that individuality of religious duty carries with it, of necessity, individuality of religious rights. He evidently looks upon independence in the expression of that duty *per se*—that is, upon the

assertion, in every individual case of the right to think and judge, and feel and act in spiritual matters, free from every kind of authoritative interference by other men—as a very trivial act—inherently and irremediably vulgar—unsuited to any but small minds—having in it nothing of the lofty, the generous, the magnanimous, or the good. But, surely, it may be soberly affirmed that the position of religious equality is one of the very noblest, grandest, most significant, most illustrious which it is possible for the human mind to take. It may, indeed, be taken by thoughtlessness—it may be taken unworthily—hypocrites may take it, and so may fools—nevertheless, it is a glorious elevation on which for man to take his stand—and if, perchance, he knows not where he is, so much the worse for him, but *it* remains unaltered.

For, wherein consists the essence of the individual assertion of religious equality? What is it, viewed in itself? It is a formal, practical, solemn renunciation of intellectual and moral servitude—an act wherein one stands erect in the presence of opposing authority and calmly declares “I am a man.” It is conscience asserting its native claim to independence, and, whilst it reverently bows down before the throne of the Supreme, and pays its homage there, expressing its determination to acknowledge no usurper. It is a stern protest against the pride and presumption which would set up for themselves a dominion where none but God can rule—a blow struck for the dignity of human nature—a maintenance of the common rights made over to us as heirs of immortality. It looks royal and ecclesiastical imperiousness in the face, and says “This conscience is not for you—nor, at your demand, are its prerogatives to be ceded, or its convictions tampered with. It sees in you no essential superiority—it owes you no responsibility. Born free, it will surrender its high birthright to no empty assumptions. Go elsewhere with your ecclesiastical decrees and laws, your threats and bribes—this mind is not for you, but for its convictions of truth only.”

This is the ultimate basis on which the doctrine of religious equality rests—this individual independence of the soul in the sphere of spiritual things. It is not the purpose of the Manchester Nonconformist Committee, which, to a limited extent, I may be understood to represent on the present occasion, nor is it



my purpose, to treat of this doctrine in its non-political aspects. I dare hardly venture—where my responsibility is divided with others—upon uncovering all my thoughts in relation to the theological, the spiritual phases of the principle it is my present business to expound. This much, perhaps, I may be allowed to intimate—that, accepting as our standard the idea and appreciation of religious equality which prevailed in apostolic times, first, as it respects individual position in relation to the Church, and secondly, as regards our social organisations of religious life, the present condition of things is not very cheerful, save, perhaps, as a common preliminary to something better than itself. I hardly know of anything more mournful in the present day than the wide success of priestly pretensions—of the claim made by no small portion of the clergy of the Church of England, and conventionally, and perhaps not very seriously, admitted by the laity, to an official superiority, wholly independent of individual character or merit. I can imagine men selling their souls to what is spiritually questionable, when lured thereto by intellectual pre-eminence and dexterity, or by ancient traditional system. I can witness the sight, lamentable as I confess it to be, without regarding them with shame and humiliation. But the rapid spread of, and wide adhesion to, the investiture of Christian truth in fine clothes, in man-millinery, in sensuous representations, all employed, be it remembered, to glorify the priesthood, is not by any means a pleasing sign of the times. I will say no more about this subject, strongly as I am tempted to do so—but I cannot thus cursorily glance at it without letting it be known that among the most powerful of inducements to pursue religious equality in its political and popular sense is the fact that the influence, the legal authority, the prestige, the honours, the pecuniary resources, and the social patronage of the State, are almost ostentatiously made available to the clergy of the Church which enjoys them, for decoying the people of England back to that depository of “ecclesiastical rubbish” which their forefathers sturdily quitted.

Religious equality, however, although founded in individual religious obligation, represents, in modern times, mainly, though not exclusively, the relation of separate religious communities to the laws of the realm. The phrase means, and always has meant, the relative position to itself in which the law of the land places

the separate organisations of Christian life into which the people of this country have chosen to distribute themselves, or with which, it may be, they are wholly disinclined to become identified. What is signified by it is the equality of all religious denominations in the presence of the law—not their equality in spiritual merit—not, when compared one with another, the equal claim of the creeds which they profess, or the equal purity of the doctrines which they uphold, or the equal fitness and success of the discipline which they enforce—but their equal right to be protected from molestation in doing their work. Mark this! because this is just the phase of the question which the opponents of the principle are strongly tempted to evade. There is no pretension to equality—or, to speak more precisely, there is no claim to any legal recognition of authority, or right, in regard to the truths, or the regulations, or the customs, which any religious denomination may assert for itself. Let them by all means enter the lists of mutual rivalry, if they please, and tilt at each other for such prizes of spiritual supremacy as they may be able to win. Religious equality does not pretend to pronounce upon their respective merits, or to judge between Episcopalians, Baptists, Independents, Presbyterians, or Friends. It claims only that the conditions of law under which they all enter the lists shall be the same—that there shall be for all and for each “a clear stage, and no favour”—and that what derives its force and its worth from the common fund of a nation’s sanction, influence, or resources, shall not be applied, or, rather, misapplied, to sectional objects.

Religious equality, then—that is, the equal position and status of all spiritual associations, so far as they are determinable by civil law, and their equal treatment, whether in the way of protection or of restraint by the legally expressed will of the nation—carries with it, of course, as its inevitable practical consequence, disestablishment and disendowment. We cannot reach the one but through means of the other. The principle in its positive and concrete form cannot be adequately embodied in the laws of the realm, until it has been used in its negative form, in detaching from special connection with the State any existing religious institutions which may chance to stand towards it in a relation of favouritism. It were to be wished that it were possible in this case to build up without first pulling down. Unfortunately



for the advocacy of so obviously an equitable, true, and noble principle, an obligation is imposed upon us to clear the ground of actual obstructions before proceeding to erect an edifice on its foundations. It will be expected of us, therefore, that having described what is comprehended within the phrase, religious equality, we should go on to vindicate it as a reasonable claim.

Most persons cherish a lively interest in the religious body to which they have attached themselves. That interest is a real thing, a possession, a gratification which I have as much right to indulge, and to claim the protection of law in indulging, as I have to minister to my desire of property. There is something representing what belongs to me—ay, I may say, to the best part of me—in the spiritual organisation which commands my confidence. The approbation given by my conscience to the forms of religious truth expressed by its standards—the intellectual pride I may have in its history and its traditions—my sympathy with the spirit of its teaching—my reliance upon the breadth, or, as the case may be, upon the precision of its avowed objects—my hope of its success, and my joy in the contemplation of it—these things are as veritable realities to me as money, or houses, or lands, or what not. I may even care for them a great deal more than for these more material possessions, prize them more highly, and more closely identify with them my well-being. Well, now, will anyone tell me what good reason can be assigned for an equality of treatment by the law of the land wherever the more tangible blessings are concerned, which cannot also be as forcibly assigned for an equality of treatment by law wherever my denominational sympathies are involved? Any show of favouritism which would be unjust in the one case would be unjust also in the other, and oftentimes more galling. Why should the law abandon me to a tyranny in regard to this matter, from which it carefully shields me in regard to that? Nay, let me withdraw the question, for it is calculated to mislead. Why should the law of the land, instead of being a protecting power to me in this regard, become an antagonistic and persecuting authority? In every parish of the kingdom I meet with institutional arrangements to obstruct the spread of my denominational views, and to efface the spiritual impressions which I deem to be most in accordance with the divine will. Well, what, you will ask, have I to complain of? Nothing whatever, I reply, so long as the

institutional opposition to my views rests upon a basis of personal conviction and voluntary effort, under the same legal protection. But, in effect, law, instead of protecting my rights in these matters, itself violates them, sets aside my claim to equality with others as an immoderate and unjustifiable claim, and ostentatiously, and in the name of God, helps my neighbour to put down my religious ideas, if they can be put down, by being constitutionally and legally discountenanced.

For example, I am (say) a Wesleyan Methodist, believing heartily in the doctrines, strongly attached to the polity, and submitting by preference to the discipline, set forth and organised by John Wesley. I put in no claim to special legal facilities on that account. I am content to stand upon the same footing as the Independents or the Baptists, the Presbyterians or the Quakers. They do not coincide with me. They are as much attached to their theological and ecclesiastical convictions as I can be to mine. I meet their competition at every turn, not a very wise one (you may suggest) in any case. But what I do not meet in the case of any of these denominations, and what I do meet with in the case of Protestant Episcopalians, is a trained minister in every parish, whose business it is to prevent as far as possible the reproduction in the minds of others of my spiritual convictions, and the extension of the religious system to which I am attached ; and who has been put where he is, and is sustained in what he does, by that law which ought to be impartial towards all its subjects. Well, this is what I call a violation of religious equality. It is in itself a thing to be complained of. It may be excusable, but if so, we should like to hear the excuse. As matters now stand, we who do not conform are doubly wronged. The law, which ought to protect all, stands right across the path of our spiritual ideas and purposes, while they whom it specially patronises shower contempt upon us because we are left out in the cold, and ask continually, as if they were truly ignorant of the real pith of the inquiry, "What is religious equality?"

But the argument, as thus put, does not represent the full strength of the case. It leaves out of sight the rights of religious communities, as such. Take, for instance, the Wesleyan bodies—for I feel more freedom in claiming perfect justice for a denomination to which I do *not* belong, than for that to which I do



belong. Well, the Wesleyan communities of various sections and shades of organisation, represent altogether an immense sum total of religious convictions—a vast force of religious activity—a singular aptitude for laying hold of, and dragging under the purifying and elevating power of Christian truth, those classes of our countrymen who are most exposed to the baneful influences of poverty, ignorance, and vice. The Bishop of your city—of whom I may say, in passing, that I would be sorry to speak in any terms but those of high respect—pleaded not long since for the continued maintenance of the Church of England as an establishment, that she is doing her work fairly well. Suppose she is—may not the same thing be said of the Wesleyan bodies? I refrain from instituting any ill-natured comparisons. But I ask, on what ground is it that public law and public resources should be set apart for the encouragement and support of the one, and for the depression and hindrance of the other? The spiritual work of Wesleyans is not even recognised by the State. In multitudes of parishes, particularly in rural districts, it is frowned upon, denounced, and obstructed by the clerical representatives of State religionism. That is to say, the State which comprehends every member of the entire community furnishes, at the expense, moral and material, of the whole nation, one section with means and authority to counteract as far as possible the religious work of another section. This is not theory only. The wrong—if it be a wrong—is real, practical, operative, common. We Dissenters meet with it in almost every turn of effort we make for the evangelisation of the country. There is always and everywhere a higher authority to overbear and neutralise, as far as in it lies, the authority to which we make our appeal in our promulgation of Christian truth. Certainly, it is a little more discreet than it used to be, especially where it is under the watchful eye of public opinion. But almost unconsciously to itself, it usually assumes airs of superiority, regards us as interlopers in the vineyard of the common Master, questions our warrant, and in many ways, and with more or less determination, impairs our religious influence. Perhaps, in any case, we are destined to encounter this kind of disparagement. But surely it is not just that we should encounter it at the hands of the State.

It is more than unjust. It is, in a high Christian sense, very

impolitic. It diminishes to an incalculable extent the remedial force which spiritual philanthropy is bringing to bear against irreligion and sin in this country. It tends to conceal, if not to misrepresent, the disinterested motives which have ever been found most successful in winning men's sympathies to the gospel of the grace of God. It destroys that harmony which ought to be pre-eminently conspicuous in the spirit and labours of those who are professedly seeking to implant faith in, and love towards, the same Lord. Denominational rivalries there would doubtless be even if law did not interpose to exasperate them. But, at any rate, they would be the growth only of human infirmity; would derive no sanction from the authority of the civil power; and might be expected to languish, if not wholly to wither, under the light and warmth of that true "law of liberty" which arbitrary restraints are so powerful to rob of its healing efficacy. The violation of religious equality between separate spiritual communities is a prolific source of divisions, carries them into almost all the grades of social life, and, to that extent, weakness among all denominations the regenerative energy of the truths they proclaim.

Now I know what will be said in justification of the present unequal bearing of the State towards different religious bodies. "We must have some national recognition of God and Christianity (unless we can be content to bear the curse of being a Godless people), and disestablishment implies that there shall be none." But is it to be understood that a national recognition of God necessarily carries with it the legal patronage and endowment of one out of many forms of Christian organisation? When the Founder of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth rebuked His disciples for disputing which of them should be greatest—or, in other words, which of them should have a right to infringe upon the law of religious equality, what was it He said? "Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so it shall not be among you. But whosoever will be great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever of you will be the chiefest shall be the servant of all." Think now, of taking such words as these, which set forth one of the great principles of Christ's kingdom, and, in the face of them,



insisting upon offering national homage to the Supreme by exalting one section of his followers above all others, and patronising, petting, and endowing its ministers as the only authorised ministers of the Son of God. We *ought* to have a national recognition of God and Christianity, but we cannot have it by trampling contemptuously or heedlessly upon Divine authority. Let the rulers of this land, in deference to the God of Peace, do all that in them lies to promote peace on earth ; let them strive to their utmost to minister justice to their subjects ; let them frame their laws upon an unselfish and impartial basis, aiming thereby to discourage immorality, to suppress vice, and to strike terror only into evil doers ; let them seek to render unto all men their due, and to extend equally to all men the protective power of the State ; and in this way, by practical obedience to the principles and spirit of the Gospel, they will do far more to please and honour God than they can do by placing the bishops of one particular church in the House of Lords, by giving legal recognition and pre-eminence to the clergy of that church, or by appropriating resources belonging to the whole nation to the special ecclesiastical advantage of less than half its people.

The second plea of justification for a violation by law of religious equality is that the poor require spiritual provision to be made for them at the threshold of their own homes, "without money and without price." To this it may be replied, that a religion which costs people nothing is not often, as a matter of fact, the most highly appreciated. It is not a cheap gospel that will save people ; or, perhaps I might more correctly say, cheapness is not the element of gospel administration best fitted to secure its acceptance. Life, warmth, disinterested affection, self-sacrifice, gentleness—these go much further to commend the grace of God to the poor than any costly provision of means at other people's expense, or any legal authority or social pre-eminence enjoyed by the clergy. But how has the existing system affected the poor in regard to their spiritual interests ? Are they, as a class, won to religion by the agency of the State Church ? Have they not everywhere, in town and in country, become very largely alienated, not merely from the Church "as by law established," but from all religious organisations ? It would be a mistake to do injustice, and to override equity, even for the purpose of saving

the souls of the poor—for God's laws cannot be transgressed with impunity. But, in truth, it is found to be a mistake that does not pay—a pretence that is not made good—an assumed responsibility that cannot be discharged. The poor must be won by some other means than by an ostentatious disregard of religious equality, even for their sakes. We commend to notice the declaration of God by His prophet—"He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

I have now done. I have looked at the question, as you will have observed, chiefly in its religious aspect. I reserve its political bearing for another place at another time. I think I cannot be far wrong in taking it for granted that Nonconformists care more for religious equality, for the effect which its adoption by the Legislature would have upon the progress and development of Christian life in this country, than for the political justice which the act would do themselves. They do not by any means undervalue the latter object, but it is with a view to the former that their main interest in it is called forth. Hence it is that I cherish the hope that the question of the Church Establishment will be settled in a religious spirit, not by the prevalence of mere numbers, still less by political passion, but calmly, considerately, and on a basis of principle which both sides will mutually recognise. That it will be settled before the end of another decade is, I think, very likely. Indeed, many shrewd politicians predict that the existing system will not endure so long, so furiously do warring sections rage within its confines. But whether this be so or not, I, for one, confidently believe that the friends of religious equality will see their work surely and fully accomplished. It may not be done by the Nonconformist bodies alone—I hope it will not—but it will be done nevertheless, and done, I trust, by the union of large numbers within the Church of England with the religious communities outside of it, for the purpose of rescuing Christian ministrations from political strife, and trusting them to those inspirations of the Divine Spirit which, according to the Apostle, "are mighty to the pulling down of strongholds."

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